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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000078

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [EPET](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: TALABANI'S MARATHON VISIT TO DAMASCUS

REF: A. 06 DAMASCUS 5326

[1](#)B. 05 DAMASCUS 6389
[1](#)C. 06 DAMASCUS 5362

Classified By: CDA Michael H. Corbin for reasons 1.4 b/d

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. During his six-day visit to Damascus, President Talabani met with most Syrians of significance, including four separate meetings with President Asad including two one-on-ones. Talabani was accompanied by some 20 Iraqi officials in addition to four ministers who signed unspecified security and economic agreements with their Syrian counterparts. The state-controlled press portrayed the visit as proof the GOI does not share the U.S. view that Syria is playing a destabilizing role in Iraq. Despite the very positive public and private statements by both sides, sequencing could be an issue for moving forward with deepening engagement, as the SARG reportedly wants economic and political confidence-building measures to precede greater security cooperation. End summary.

[1](#)2. (U) The SARG has given extensive, positive media coverage to Iraqi President Jalal Talabani's January 14 to 20 visit to Damascus. The SARG's stated goals for the visit were enhancing economic and security cooperation. A number of agreements on economic and security cooperation were signed, including reviving the tripartite water-sharing commission with Turkey and an MOU to build a new oil pipeline. Talabani made a good-will gesture to both the Asad regime and the Syrian people early on by visiting former President Hafiz Asad's tomb in Lattakia and publicly stating Syria is his &first home.⁸ (Talabani spent many years in exile in Damascus during Saddam's reign and still has an apartment here.)

[1](#)3. (U) On January 18, the Charge attended a briefing given by President Talabani for the resident diplomatic community. Talabani told the assembled ambassadors and heads of mission that his Interior Minister had signed an unspecified security agreement with his Syrian counterpart, but denied rumors that the GOI had given the SARG a list of former Saddam loyalists that it wanted returned to Iraq. Talabani commented that extensive discussions were held on transportation and oil. These discussions will continue in the future, he said. Though no ambassadors were named to either Iraq's embassy in Damascus or Syria's embassy in Baghdad, Talabani did comment that he had shared a short list of candidates to head Iraq's mission with his Syrian interlocutors. The effusive Talabani asserted that Syria-Iraqi relations would be the model for

Iraq's relations with its other neighbors. Asked for his view on USG policy-level engagement with the SARG, Talabani commented that he would view it as both useful and fruitful.

¶4. (C) In a separate briefing with Arab ambassadors, Talabani said that he was very frank with the Syrians and pushed them to make public statements condemning the ongoing violence in Iraq. Talabani asserted that Arab governments share responsibility for attacks like the university bombings that occurred during his visit when they do not speak out. Talabani called on all Arab states to send ambassadors to Iraq. He was critical of those not supporting the political process in Iraq, and criticized Libya and Jordan for their comments on the Saddam Hussein hanging. (Note. Perhaps in anticipation of the criticism, the Libyan Charge boycotted briefing. End note.)

¶5. (C) The Norwegian MFA Middle East coordinator and former Norwegian Ambassador to Syria, Sven Sevje, offered the Charge a readout of his meeting with FM Walid Mu'allim on the Talabani visit. According to Sevje, the SARG viewed the visit as successful. Mu'allim related a few potential sticking points for future progress, including the high priority the SARG attached to the GOI legalizing the Iraqi Baath party and its reintegration of former Iraqi military officers. Sevje reported Mu'allim did not rule out SARG participation in a regional conference on Iraq and its neighbors.

¶6. (C) A number of interlocutors have commented to us that sequencing moving forward could be problematic as both sides strive to build on Talabani's visit. The SARG has long been interested in being a transit route for Iraqi oil and gas (ref B) and has recently approached international oil

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companies (IOC) operating in Syria to gauge their interest in conducting joint ventures that would include Iraq. Additionally, Royal Dutch Shell recently presented a proposal to the SARG on transiting Iraqi gas from the Akkas gas field on the border, through Syria, to either the Arab gas pipeline or an LNG facility on the coast. The SARG also expects Iraq to immediately make greater use of its ports and purchase more of its goods. In an apparent gesture of goodwill on the eve of Talabani's arrival, the SARG Minister of Trade, Amer Lutfi, was notified by his Iraqi counterpart that the GOI would purchase some 500,000 tons of Syrian wheat, according to Mehdi Sejjad, an Iraqi/UK businessman who helped broker the visit.

¶7. (C) The Iraqi side is very focused on security and Talabani made clear in his briefings to ambassadors that "security was the main focus" for the Iraqi delegation. The Iraqi Charge, Sabah al-Imam, told us that Talabani gave President Asad a file containing a list of Iraqis present in Syria that the GOI wanted either expelled or returned to Iraq. Sabah commented that it became increasingly clear during Talabani's time in Damascus that the SARG would not deliver on GOI security requests until it realized both economic and political benefits from Iraq. Talabani's lack of specificity on what was agreed, and the lack of specific results leading up to the visit, suggest the SARG has yet to focus on GOI priorities.

¶8. (C) Comment: Despite the very positive public and private statements by both sides, security cooperation and high SARG expectations for economic benefits from the relationship will likely remain sticking points. Average Syrians generally reacted positively to the Talabani visit, hoping that it is an important, if indirect, step toward Syrian re-engagement with the U.S. Syrian businessmen view Iraq as a lucrative future market and are anxious for progress on the Syria-Iraq relationship. In spite of his many positive public statements, however, Talabani announced few tangible results from the six days he spent in Damascus. Continued progress will depend in part on the SARG's

willingness to deliver on specific Iraqi security requests,
which Damascus will likely delay until it sees specific
political and economic commitments.
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